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ABSTRACT

A teacher describes the use of closed-caption decoding of television melodramas to teach English as a second language (ESL). The approach uses evening soap operas that afford a range of English usage and accents, realistic dialogue, entertainment, and coverage of current social issues and are closed-captioned for the hearing-impaired. The programs are required viewing for the students, who are also encouraged to take notes and ask American viewers about program portions they do not understand. The programs are recorded, and with the help of two remote-controlled videocassette recorders, tests, exercises, and quizzes are constructed by interspersing television scenes with other materials. Students are also required to discuss the programs in class and with their American counterparts. Other class activities such as contests, role-playing, and mock interviews are used to increase student language usage and add variety to classroom interaction. (MSE)

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SOAP OPERAS and CAPTIONING in the EFL Class

Donald T. Huffman

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ABSTRACT

This paper was the introduction to a demonstration using the Closed-caption decoder. It explains some of the advantages of choosing soap operas as classroom material to teach listening comprehension and describes some exercises that were combined with captioning to promote group discussion and conversation.

SOAP OPERAS and CAPTIONING in the EFL Class

If English teachers wish to teach literature, they have libraries and bookstores full of available materials. Publishers produce even more written material every year. If teachers want to teach writing, composition, grammar, they too have no difficulty finding books aplenty. If teachers want to improve their students listening and speaking abilities, many available books claim to help them accomplish this goal. But how can mute materials help anyone comprehend or converse better?

To understand conversation better, auditory materials are required. Students need to hear natural-sounding conversation used in realistic situations. They need to hear words spoken with anger, affection, deceit, honesty--in short, with all the basic human emotions. If they do not have ample opportunity to observe such speech in real life, next best would be to see it on television, performed by professional actors, written by professional playwrights, intended to suspend the viewer´s disbelief.

The writers have created natural dialogue by including fragments as well as complete sentences. They use some slang and current idioms. Although profanity hasn´t been gratuitously added to shock, it is also present. Since many ESL students confuse slang and profanity, a careful study of their use would benefit students´ comprehension.

Television also affords an opportunity to hear a variety of English, such as, Larry Hagman´s Texan, Christopher Cazenove´s Australian, and Joan Collins´ Received Standard.

Although television melodramas can be understood with one´s eyes closed, they are more easily followed by foreign speakers when they have the reinforcing information supplied by the actors´ body language. Similarly, it is easier for them to follow a conversation when the speakers are present than when they are at the other end of a telephone. When more reinforcement in the form of captions is added, they can follow much more easily.

In addition to their realistic dialogue television dramas have great entertainment value. Dynasty claims to be seen in sixty countries. Dallas is seen in fifty-seven lands. Falcon Crest was a favorite in Europe until last August. These dramas deal with current topics, such as, abortion, the environment, filial rivalry, homosexuality, hostage behavior, and rape. Each episode finishes with a "cliff hanger" to bring the viewers back the following week or season.

Because these series are so popular, their sponsors have captioned them for the hard of hearing. Most of the programming at prime time in the United States is so captioned. There are two kinds of captioning: open and closed. Open captioning can be seen with any television set without a decoding device.

Presidential speeches and some news programs use this type of captioning. An expert typist enters the captions or subtitles when the program is transmitted. Since these typists work under enormous pressure, not surprisingly, they commit typographical errors.

Closed captions can only be seen after a special decoding device has been interposed between the television set and the program source. The source can be an antenna, cable, or a videorecorder (VCR). Since the programs are captioned months in advance of their transmission, they are almost error-free; a few errors are caused by atmospheric disturbance. Since these programs are captioned for the hearing-impaired and not for ESL students, the captions are very good, but they are not an exact transcription of the actors´ lines.

The closed captioning decoder can do more than just supply subtitles. It has two switchable inputs; one is intended for cable and the second for a VCR. For classroom use remote controlled VCRs can be attached to both inputs. The second VCR can hold cloze quizzes, vocabulary help, etc. which the teacher can switch in between scenes. The decoder also has a three-way switch for selecting normal operation, captioning, or teletext. With an Amiga computer one should be able to enter one´s own text in this channel. All of these operations can be controlled remotely.

Ample use of the televised material will probably improve listening comprehension. Used with well-constructed viewing guides, vocabulary and idiom lists, students' comprehension improves even faster. But what can be done to improve their speaking abilities?

Just as the best way to learn to write is to write and write, to learn to communicate better, EFL students must converse more. Their classwork and homework are planned with this goal in mind. They are supposed to watch the television melodrama in the company of American students. During the viewing they jot down an outline of the events, new vocabulary and expressions. During the commercial interruptions they should ask the American viewers about anything that they didn't understand. They are encouraged to record the audio portion of the program for later review and practice.

In the beginning of the course, the ESL students are required to interview their American counterparts. They describe the characters and inquire about their histories and motivations. They are asked to interview people in their dormitories about Soap Operas in general. Do they watch Soap Operas? Which is their favorite? Why?

In the classroom, the students are given a very small quiz to see if they have done the homework and also to help them realize that the homework was in earnest. Next they are divided

into small discussion groups. They are then shown excerpts from the latest episode and given a topic to discuss. Should Donna Krebbs bring her baby into the world with Downs Syndrome? What do you think she will do? How would this problem be handled in your own culture? What would you do if you were Miss Ellie? Your husband was lost in the jungle, declared dead; after you remarry, he reappears.

A popular method for increasing the amount of student conversation is a contest. The class is divided into discussion groups or teams. Each team discusses the latest episode, reconstructs the story line and tries to find questions to baffle the other teams. Shy students find it easier to participate in these smaller groups and also respond to challenge of competition. A second kind of contest evolved out of the first game; instead of trying to stump the other teams, they try to gain points by baffling their teacher.

Role plays can also be used for varieaty. Using the decoder in conjunction with the pause button, the teacher can easily make a transcript of suitable scenes; most scenes contain only two speakers and afford good dialogue practice. Several selected scenes can be acted out. After the class has learned the dialogue adequately, the teacher can suggest that the student actors do the scene as if it had taken place in their country, or as they wish it had happened.

Another effective exercise is the interview. The teacher assigns or lets a student choose to be a character from the soap opera. A classmate plays the part of a reporter and must interview the former on current events in the series.

Students profit from using captioning with soap operas by having interesting, almost addictive, audiovisual materials that use the added reinforcement of captions to help them comprehend realistic English conversation more easily. Since the captions are almost identical to the spoken dialogue, when read aloud, they can be used as a ready-made script to help students practice proper chunking, pronunciation, and intonation.

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